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ABSTRACT

For a less commonly taught (LCT) language to thrive in a high school curriculum, issues of support and accessibility must be addressed. Counselors, administrators, and teachers must work together to show students that these are not difficult languages. Designing the programs for "gifted and talented" students unfairly excludes many capable ones, so a philosophy of equal access is important. Establishing and maintaining an LCT language must not fall totally on the teacher, but should be supported by district and building administration. Designating a classroom helps these languages find their identity within the school. The LCT language teacher's efforts to publicize it may be perceived as recruitment by other teachers; the teacher should meet with junior- and senior-high counselors to answer questions and address preconceived ideas about the languages' difficulty. A flier sent to entering freshmen can be useful. A language club helps reinforce the language and culture and promote its study. Enrolling freshmen helps ensure continued high enrollment. Creating a four-year sequence and preparing students for continued study in college also helps achieve success. Finally, a good relationship between the LCT and other language teachers is vital; enrollment issues and concerns about sharing classrooms should be discussed. (MSE)

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# Less Commonly Taught Languages in High School

By John Watzke
From a Conference Presentation for the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages

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# Less Commonly Taught Languages in High School

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FOR a less commonly taught (LCT) language such as Russian, Japanese, or Chinese to be offered at a high school, support from administrators and students must be well thought out and planned. For LCT languages to thrive at the secondary level, a philosophy of accessibility for all students must be reflected by the school district, school administration, and staff—from principals, counselors, and teachers to the students themselves.

As the instructor of a four-year Russian language program in an Iowa high school, I have observed central issues which must be addressed by all those involved when considering making an LCT language part of the high school curriculum. Every school district has its own restraints, but the goal of creating an academic opportunity for every student is key in offering an LCT language to students. In my experience, consideration of the following criteria by school district administration, building principals, and the teacher of the language to be taught can help establish the role the LCT language will play in the curriculum.

Counselors, administrators, and the teachers of these LCT languages must work together to show students that these are not difficult languages. It may take longer to reach the same proficiency in an LCT language than it took in a romance language, but students will not suffer academically because of this. LCT languages can be taught in segments easily managed by secondary students.

Accessibility is perhaps the most important issue. Designing these classes for top students or the "gifted and talented" excludes a large population of students. It has been my experience that A, B, and C students generally receive A's, B's, and C's, respectively, in LCT languages. A 1991

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survey of students studying Russian, Japanese, and Chinese in Iowa high schools confirms this. A philosophy of equal access must be adopted by all those responsible for implementing an LCT language in a high school.

Establishing and maintaining the teaching of an LCT language should not fall totally on the teacher. Support from the district and building administration should first come in the form of establishing program development goals, which may include the number of levels to be offered, the minimum number of students needed to maintain the language and the maximum as a goal for enrollment, dealing with potentially small classes in the first years of the program, and where in the building the language will be taught. Once these goals are established and discussed, a plan in which roles are identified to achieve them must be laid out.

**Establishing and maintaining the teaching of an LCT language should not fall totally on the teacher.**

Designating a classroom as part of the process of having these languages find their identity in the school and the curriculum is important. Administrators' opinions on this point reflect their degree of commitment to the language. Should a school wait until enrollment in the new language increases to a point where a classroom is provided, or should a classroom be provided earlier to aid in developing the language? Advanced planning of daily lessons, finding a place to meet with students seeking help, and creating a classroom atmosphere where students can focus on the culture of the language and display their projects and work should be discussed. Establishing goals with administrators helps build a commitment toward teaching the LCT language and also clarifies and defines their support.

The teacher of an LCT language is the obvious spokesperson for it, but the teacher's attempts to publicize it may be seen as recruiting by other teachers. Avoiding negative feelings, especially when the language is first being established, is important. There are ways to help raise enrollment numbers that will not seem like blatant attempts to recruit. Again, administrative support in these endeavors is important to help lend legitimacy to the efforts.

The teacher should meet with junior- and senior-high counselors who might direct students away from the language or advise them to wait until their sophomore or junior year to study it, fearing these languages are too difficult for average students. Meeting with counselors to answer questions or address their preconceived notions of LCT languages is a step towards making them more accessible to students.

A flier sent to students or parents of students entering ninth grade also gets the word out. Several copies can be placed in the mailbox of each counselor for their files, to be made available to parents and students. Questions the flier might answer include: Is the study of this language difficult? Should I wait a year to study it? Will I be prepared for more advanced study at the college level? What are career prospects for students who study it?

A club can be established to reinforce the LCT language and its culture and to promote its study in the school. At Valley High School, the Russian club treated the cast of the drama department's production of an Anton Chekov play to a variety of traditional Russian food after their final performance.

The language club or advanced students can visit elementary and junior high schools to introduce the LCT language and its culture. A practicum can be set up in which students visit one class over several weeks to teach songs and phrases of the language. Summer and after-school study programs can be established to introduce elementary or junior high students to elements of the language and culture of the LCT language.

Of several factors to be considered in developing a curriculum for the LCT language, first is the importance of enrolling freshmen in a four-year curriculum to ensure continuation of high numbers for each level of it; upperclassmen often make up a large number of the students at the first two levels. Creating a four-year sequence is important for developing proficiency in the language, and preparation must also be made for further study in college. The following suggestions refer to a curriculum spread over four years but are adaptable to a variety of high school situations.

Level I sets the focus of the four-year curriculum as being communicatively based. It is centered around units which emphasize conversational and survival skills. Students enrolling in Level I gain a large amount of conversational and cultural competence which prepares them for short-term travel in the country of the target language and brief encounters with native speakers. Within these units, a knowledge of basic grammar is gained which allows freshmen and sophomores to advance to the next levels of language study, while juniors and seniors are prepared for lower-level study in college. Students advance into Level II as more grammatical structures are introduced and discussed. In this way, juniors and seniors wishing to try this new lan-

**A language club can reinforce the LCT language and its culture and promote its study in the school.**

guage, as well as freshmen and sophomores planning to continue study in high school, benefit over two levels of instruction.

Levels III and IV of instruction bring the four years of language instruction full circle as students are prepared for possible study at the college level. As a goal, students are to place into the second- or third-year level in college. Longer readings and essays are assigned as the major grammatical structures of the language are introduced and thematic presentations in the target language are completed by students. Communicative uses for grammatical structures continue to be stressed. After completing levels III and IV, students will have a level of proficiency in the language allowing them to function in that culture and pursue further study of the language.

**When other foreign language teachers in the department feel good about you, it helps the status of the new language.**

In establishing an LCT language in high school, a good relationship with other foreign language teachers is most important. When other teachers in the foreign language department feel good about having you as a colleague, it helps improve the status of the new language in school.

Fear that the new language will cause lowered enrollments in other languages should be openly discussed. Enrollment in foreign languages at my high school increased steadily over the past 10 years, reflecting a national trend. Adding another foreign language helped relieve overcrowding in other languages.

The LCT teacher will likely share classrooms with other teachers. Discussing the use of classrooms helps make the teacher's presence in another instructor's room less invasive. If several teachers' classrooms must be "borrowed" for a period of the day, territorialism should not keep the new teacher from becoming a productive addition to the department. These same teachers will be willing to help or listen as the new teacher learns the policies and ways of the school.

Other members of the foreign language department represent a wealth of knowledge. Although the language they teach may be different, they will have experienced many of the same problems faced by the teacher of the LCT language in the classroom. A good relationship with other members of the department is vital to the success of the LCT language.

These issues are central to creating the opportunity for all students in a high school to consider the study of an LCT language. Discussing each issue and finding a consensus with those involved in establishing the language will bring students closer to opportunities which may once have seemed out of reach. ED